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ABSTRACT

Three philosophical perspectives on communication research are identified, described, and compared. First, communication of "action," a one-way approach, is a type of "cybernetic" theory of communication involving observation and experience in developing patterns of communication performance. It is simplistic, has a weak capacity for replication of certain situations, and has a limited ability for generalizing observations. The second perspective, "interaction," a "merger of self and other" with "a complete ability to anticipate, predict and behave with the joint needs of self and other," is advantageous since it allows communication theories to be tested in controlled and repeated situations. The third approach, "transaction," has been employed in at least four different contexts: (1) the philosophical view of the "complete communication system" (Dewey and Bentley); (2) the perception of persons and objects (Ittelson and Cantril); (3) the exchange of interpersonal goods and services (Bauer); and (4) the analysis of relationships in the psychotherapeutic situation (Berne). "Transaction" shows increased popularity, especially in various therapy treatments. (DS)

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ACTION, INTERACTION, AND TRANSACTION: THREE MEANS OF VIEWING THE COMMUNICATION "WORLD"

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and compares three philosophical perspectives on communication research: "action," "interaction," and "transaction." Originally identified by Dewey and Bentley as perspectives on any form of scientific inquiry, these three means of viewing the communication "world" have shaped the manner in which communication research has been conducted.

The "action" perspective is said to take the form of a prescientific view toward problem-solving, using mainly observation and experience to create a firm set of rules for communication performance. The "interaction" perspective is characterized by the concepts of reciprocity of role taking and ability to predict behavior. The term "transaction" has been employed in at least four different contexts: (1) the philosophical view of full-system advocated by Dewey and Bentley; (2) the perception of persons and objects as seen by Ittelson and Cantril; (3) the exchange of interpersonal goods and services described by Bauer; and (4) the analysis of relationships in the psychotheraputic situation originated by Berne.

It is hoped that a clearer understanding of these three philosophical perspectives will aid the researcher in determining how communication "works."

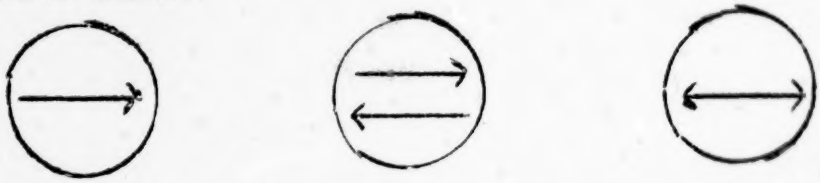
ACTION, INTERACTION, AND TRANSACTION: THREE MEANS OF VIEWING THE COMMUNICATION "WORLD"

> The difficulties attending dependability of communication and mutual intelligibility in connection with problems of knowledge are notoriously great. They are so numerous and acute that disagreement, controversy, and misunderstanding are almost taken to be matters of course. The studies upon which report is made in this volume are the outgrowth of a conviction that a greater degree of dependability, and hence mutual understanding, and of ability to turn differences to mutual advantage, is as practical as it is essential.[1]

So wrote John Dewey and Arthur Bentley in the preface to their 1949 book, Knowing and the Known. Although intended to have philosophical implications, the sentiment expressed by the authors seems to capture the spirit of the primary goal of any communication researcher - to determine how communication "works."

Unfortunately, those of us who are engaged in studying "communication" cannot even agree on what it is we are studying, let alone on how to go about studying it. Suppose, for example, that I was to ask you to draw me a representation of the "communication world." I would probably get as many different drawings as there were people doing the drawings. Part of the reason for the differences might lie in the unique manner in which each of us perceives the world around him (or, as the general semantist might say, "$world_1 \neq world_2$"), but part of the differences would center around the manner in which each of us were taught to view the "world" of communication.

For instance, if I were to take a large number of drawings of the communication "world" and attempt to classify them, I might find that three general types emerge. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the "world" can be represented by a circle and that the communication contained within that world can be represented by arrows. The three types could then be symbolized as follows:



In a similar manner, Dewey and Bentley identified three philosophical perspectives on obtaining knowledge that correspond roughly with the three communication "worlds" pictured above. The three perspectives were called, "action," "interaction," and "transaction." While none of these terms should be unfamiliar to communication researchers, they all seem to be used interchangeably in describing communication events. The purpose of this paper, then, is to clarify the subtle but important differences among these three means of viewing the communication "world" and to discuss the implications of these differences for the process of discovering how communication "works."

Action

"Communication as action" seemed to be the philosophy behind the development of many of the early communication theories. As Dewey and Bentley described it, action is "pre-scientific presentation in terms of presumptively independent 'actors,' 'souls,' 'minds,' 'selves,' 'powers,' or 'forces,' taken as activating events."[2] From a communication standpoint, John Stewart described the action approach as, "getting a person's thoughts or ideas into somebody else's head. According to this point of view, communication is

an act - something you or I do 'to' somebody else."[3]

Certainly, early models of communication focused on the one-way aspects of the process (such as in Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model), or made any reversal of the process seem extremely nebulous (as in Lasswell's "Who, Says What, To Whom, With What Effect" model). The natural outgrowth of an emphasis on the act of communication itself was a "cybernetic" theory of communication, applicable to the high-speed computers then being developed. Since a computer could transmit information accurately and effectively, it seemed natural that by developing a theory of information, humans could adopt for their own use part of the computer technology. As Broadhurst and Darnell wrote:

> Information theory, therefore, is not concerned with information at all - not in the common meaning of the term "information." Information theory does not deal with meaning, with message content, with knowledge about a subject. Why, then, is information theory so important to communication? It is because the transmission of "information," eliciting meanings in others, requires a code - a set of symbols and a set of rules for combining them - and information theory is concerned with codes and the capacities of channels.[4]

Implications - Although most of us would probably reject "action" as a philosophical construct as being overly simplistic, practically all of us employs this porspective at one time or another in the course of our duties. How many times, for example, have we told our students, "Stand up straight when speaking - otherwise, you're distracting your audience," without stopping to ask the audience whether or not they noticed the "distraction?"

The power of prescription is a strong one. Though we realize that one

cannot take two pink pills before going to bed and wake up the next morning as Superman (or Superwoman, if you prefer), but we are attracted by books promising to let us in on the secrets of how to be an effective communicator (witness, for example, the sales figures for "How to Win Friends and Influence People," and "Body Language"). The ironic part of all this is that these books do provide us with insight into how communication "works" by presenting material that is believable by "common sense" standards. As research on dissonance theory demonstrated, however, "common sense" is not always the best predictor of results.

In a similar manner, the rhetorical critic must fall back upon examination of the act of speaking itself if he is to criticize a speech at which he was not physically present. While such an approach has advantages and can lead to fresh insights regarding the speaker or his audience, some very strong drawbacks are evident. For example, Edwin Black's critique of John Jay Chapman's "Coatsville Address" contains high praise for the speaker and his message. In retrospect, and with certain standards of what is a "good" speech in mind, the praise may be deserved. Since the original speech was heard by only three people, however, it seems a bit presumptuous to call the address a piece of "effective communication."[5]

Thus, the action perspective can be employed to evaluate specific communication situations in terms of commonly-accepted standards. The main drawback to the approach as a means of viewing communication is that the generalizability of the observations is limited and capacity for replication of specific situations is weak.

Interaction

While the prescriptive action approach appropriately describes much of

the work in rhetorical theory, it has been from the interaction perspective that most communication research has proceeded. Dewey and Bentley defined interaction as, "presentation of particles or other objects organized as operating on one another."[6] Presented from the standpoint of the communication researcher, David Berlo defined interaction in the following manner:

> The term interaction names the process of reciprocal role-taking, the mutual performance of empathic behaviors. If two individuals make inferences about their own roles and take the role of the other at the same time, and if their communication behavior depends on the reciprocal taking of roles, then they are communicating by interacting with each other . . . The goal of interaction is the merger of self and other, a complete ability to anticipate, predict, and behave with the joint needs of self and other.[7] (emphasis mine)

Note that Berlo's definition included two important concepts not postulated by the action approach. The first concept is that of reciprocity. In the simplest case where only two persons are involved, reciprocity means that the two are communicating with each other, rather than one person always being labeled the "sender" and the other being labeled the "receiver." Since the two are constantly sending both verbal and nonverbal signals to each other, it is reasonable to assume that some of these signals are being interpreted as feedback, thus controlling what is sent in the future. The other concept is that of causation. In the simplest form again, if a given stimulus can cause a given response, then a basis for predicting the effects of communication can be established.

Implications - The advantages to employing an interaction perspective in research on communication are extremely compelling. First, the interaction

perspective allows the predictive value of communication theories to be tested in controlled and replicable situations. Changes in theory under the action approach could only be based on observation in various situations over a long period of time. The interaction approach is, in this instance, more parsimonious and less time-consuming.

The other distinct advantage of the interaction perspective is that it allows for identification and testing of the effect of variables in the communication situation. Although manipulating individual variables can be at times a clumsey, cumbersome process, the result can easily be which of several variables can affect an individual strongest and in which situations will certain variables be most effective (as the body of research on "source credibility" has ably demorstrated).

There are some drawbacks to the interaction perspective, however, that may even overshadow the advantages. One drawback lies in the concept of "effect." A single message in isolation will not necessarily produce a single response, even when chance responses are eliminated either through experimental controls or through statistical manipulation of the data. As Darnell suggested, communication may be complex enough that even if the same message affected two people in similar fashion, that message might produce a completely different response in those same two people when received co-jointly.[8]

In a similar vein is the argument that no communication situation is simple enough so that certain variables can be isolated as being the "cause" of communication behavior. While communication researchers are rapidly becoming more and more acquainted with multivariate design and analysis tecaniques, the time period required to design and execute a multivariate

study makes such research less desireable to those caught in the clutches of the "publish or perish" syndrome.

Finally, the ethics involved in studying human subjects have prevented complete experimental control of all variables necessary to truly determine causation. While serious researchers have advocated abolishment of such ethics, it is not likely that the standards for research on human beings will change quickly.[9]

Transaction

Although Dewey and Bentley defined "transaction" as, "functional observation of full system, actively necessary to inquiry at some stages, held in reserve at other stages, frequently requiring the breaking down of older verbal impactions of naming,"[10] the term "transaction" has been employed in at least four different contexts, each adding some unique quality to the meaning of the term.

The original discussion of the transactional approach can be found in Dewey and Bentley. Comparing transaction to action and interaction in terms of meaning, the authors wrote:

> If, in replacement of the older self-action by a knower in person, inter-action assumes little "reals" interacting with or upon portions of the flesh of an organism to produce all knowings up to and including both the most mechanistic and the most unmechanistic theories of knowledge, then--
>
> Transaction is the procedure which observes men talking and writing, with their word-behaviors and other representational activities connected with their thing-perceivings and manipulations, and which permits a full treatment, descriptive and functional, or the whole process,

> inclusive of all its "contents," whether called "inners" or "outers," in whatever way the advancing techniques of inquiry require.[11]

In other words, the transaction approach looks at the whole process of communication without attempting to delineate its parts, or to study the process at any single point in time.

Taking some of Dewey and Bentley's original notions, a group of perception writers attempted to apply the transaction philosophy to the systematic nature of scientific inquiry. Their version of transaction, as applied to perception, was voiced by Ittelson and Cantril:

> Neither a perception nor an object-as-perceived exists independent of the total life situation of which both perception and object are part. It is meaningless to speak of either as existing apart from the situation in which it is encountered. The word <u>transaction</u> is used to label such a situation. For the word <u>transaction</u> carries the double implication that (1) all parts of the situation enter into it as active participants, and that (2) they owe their very existence as encountered in the situation to this fact of active participation and do not appear as already existing entities merely interacting with each other without affecting their own identity.[12]

According to this point of view, then, transaction has the effect of not only making each situation unique for each participant, but the <u>event itself</u> will invariably change all persons or objects involved in it.

A third approach to transaction was derived from exchange theory and applied the concept of transaction to the realm of business and industry. The leading proponent of this approach has been consumer psychologist Raymond Bauer, who wrote, "Transaction . . . is used here in the sense of an

exchange of values between two or more parties; each gives in order to get."[13] Although Bauer recognized that the exchange need not be "equal" in every sense of the word, he concluded:

> The rough balance of exchange is sufficiently equitable in the long run to keep most individuals in our society engaged in the transactional relations of communication and influence. But some "alienated" people absent themselves from the network of communication, as do, also, many businessmen who have doubts about the money they spend on advertising. The alienation is by no means peculiar to one end of the chain of communication or influence.[14]

In comparing the exchange approach to the perception approach, some parallels can be drawn. Exchange theory certainly would admit that each encounter would be an unique occurrence. As for the change in the participants mandod by the perception approach, the concept of exchange suggests that something is given in return for something else. Since each participant gives up something and receives something, a change must have occurred in both. The exchange can be attempted again by the same participants, but no two exchanges will ever be exactly alike, because one important element in the system, time, can never be recovered.

The final approach to transaction was drawn from the realm of psychotherapy. In recent years, "transactional analysis" has become increasingly popular, especially in group treatment. The relationship of transactional analysis to communication concepts has been explained by Eric Berne, the originator of T.A.:[15] each person's personality is said to be divided into three "selves" or "ego-states." These are known as Parent, Adult, and Child, and in visual form, they are portrayed as circles arranged in order from

top to bottom. Vectors drawn between ego-states of the participants indicate the nature of the transaction. If the vectors remain parallel, communication satisfaction has been attained. If the vectors cross each other at any time, however, communication should be deemed unsuccessful. Many transactions are elusive, however, and avoid analysis by covering themselves with an ulterior nature; that is, while overtly the vectors might point in one direction (such as Adult-Adult), the real transaction is being carried out at the Adult-Child level.

What seems important for our purposes in terms of Berne's writing is that each individual has a multiplicity of selves which he can use in any relationship. Each person, then, responds according to his own needs and his unique perceptions of the situation in which he finds himself

In summarizing the concept of transaction from a communication standpoint, Barnlund[16] provided six postulates of communication-as-transaction: (1) because of selective perception, communication describes the evolution of meaning; (2) communication is continuous; (3) communication is circular; (4) communication is unrepeatable; (5) communication is irreversible; and (6) communication is complex, never contained in a simple context. To these postulates, Stewart added two others:[17] (7) communication is existential, existing always in the here-and-now; and (8) in communication, the participants view each other as unique persons rather than as objects or in the context of assumed or assigned roles.

Implications - "Transaction" is a much-maligned word; it has been used to describe all sorts of communication phenomena without awareness as to the philosophical implications of the use of the term.

"Transaction" seems to imply the appropriateness of a systems model

over the traditional covering-law model inherent in the interaction approach. In a recent article, Mongo[18] explained that while a systems model could not explain the influence of variables in the communication process as well as the covering law model, such a model would provide the basis for a more sophisticated analysis of communication behavior.

Mongo listed three advantages to using the systems paradigm. Those were: (1) a systems model can shift emphasis to a different set of variables for study by asking the following questions: (a) What is an equilibrium state for a person, dyad, or group and what part does communication play in helping reach this state? (b) How does the complexity of the communication system affect performance? (c) What group and societal constraints typically operate to produce communication structure and how does communication structure affect functioning? (d) How does communication function to control and regulate behavior in specified situations? (e) Are certain information coding and transmission techniques more efficient for some tasks than for others? (f) Do communication systems have life cycles; do they evolve through different stages? (2) a systems model can increase the level of complexity of analysis; and (3) a systems model can better function to explain existing results.

While the use of a broader view of the situation might prove useful for explaining how communication "worked" in that situation, it would seem that the problem of generalization encountered in the action perspective would also apply here. Mongo's list of questions seem to rehash old variables in a slightly different light; if transaction is to be a truly unique perspective, postulating individualized response to any situation, then it would seem that new research strategies are needed to fully realize the transactional perspective. Until such strategies are provided, it would

seem that the transactional perspective on communication will remain a philosophical one exclusively.

Summary and Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on three general perspectives on communication theory - action, interaction, and transaction. It was found that action and interaction enjoyed a rather clear-cut derivation of meaning, while transaction has generated at least four different contexts.

Perhaps the best summary of the distinctions between the three views of the communication "world" was provided by Cantril and Bumstead:

> We might . . . illustrate what we mean by a story of three baseball umpires who were discussing their profession. The first one said, "Some's balls and some's strikes and I calls 'em as they is." The second one said, "Some's balls and some's strikes and I calls 'em as I sees 'em." While the third one said, "Some's balls and some's strikes but they ain't nothin' till I calls 'em."[19]

NOTES

[1]John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, Knowing and the Known (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), p. v.

[2]Ibid, pp. 72-73.

[3]John Stewart, ed., Bridges Not Walls (Menlo Park, California: Addison Wesley, 1973), p. 8.

[4]Allan R. Broadhurst and Donald K. Darnell, "An Introduction to Cybernetics and Information," in Kenneth K. Sereno and C. David Mortensen, eds., Foundations of Communication Theory (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 64.

[5]Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

[6]Dewey and Bentley, p. 73.

[7]David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 130-131.

[8]Donald K. Darnell, "Toward a Reconceptualization of Communication," Journal of Communication, 21 (March, 1971), p. 12.

[9]B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

[10]Dewey and Bentley, p. 73.

[11]Ibid., p. 123.

[12]William H. Ittelson and Hadley Cantril, Perception: A Transactional Approach (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 3.

[13]Raymond A. Bauer, "The Obstinate Audience: The Influence Process from the Point of View of Social Communication," in Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts, eds., The Process and Effects of Mass Communication, Revised Edition (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 345.

[14]Ibid., p. 346.

[15]Eric Berne, Principles of Group Treatment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 223-227.

[16]Dean C. Barnlund, "A Transactional Model of Communication," in Sereno and Mortenson, pp. 87-94.

[17]Stewart, pp. 11, 14.

[18]Peter Monge, "Theory Construction in the Study of Communication: The System Paradigm," Journal of Communication, 23 (March, 1973), pp. 5-16.

[19]Hadley Cantril and Charles H. Bumstead, Reflections on the Human Venture (New York: New York University Press, 1960), p. 16.

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